

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

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R 291500Z NOV 74

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INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

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AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY ROME

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

USUN NEW YORK 129

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 2842

EXDIS

DEPARTMENT PASS USCINCEUR

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, SY

SUBJECT: SYRIAN CHIEF OF STAFF COMMENTS ON NOV 15-16 CRISIS

1. IN NOV 27 MEETING, THE FIRST THAT HAD BEEN POSSIBLE FOR COS SHIHABI SINCE THE ERUPTION OF TENSION ON GOLAN NOV 15, I ASKED HIM IF HE WOULD COMMENT ON THAT WEEK-END'S EVENTS AS SEEN FROM SARG'S VANTAGE POINT.

2. SHIHABI WELCOMED THE CHANCE TO SHARE ASSESSMENTS. HE SAID THAT SARG HAD INITIALLY BELIEVED OUTBREAK OF WAR, LAUNCHED BY ISRAEL, HAD BEEN CLOSE ON THAT WEEKEND. FOR ITS PART, SYRIA HAD HAD NO INTENTION OF TAKING OFFENSIVE ACTION; ITS MILITARY DISPOSITIONS THROUGHOUT HAD BEEN PURELY DEFENSIVE. SARG HAS SINCE CONCLUDED THAT ISRAEL INTENDED AT MINIMUM TO GRAVELY INCREASE THE TENSION IN THE AREA SEEKING THEREBY TO PROVOKE SYRIA INTO LAUNCHING HOSTILITIES.

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IN THIS CONNECTION HE REFERRED TO ISRAELI RADIO COM-

MENTARIES, PARTICULARLY ONE BY RETIRED GENERAL HERZOG THREATENING UNPLEASANT CONSEQUENCIES IF SYRIA DID NOT AGREE TO RENEW UNDOF'S MANDATE. SHIHABI SAID SYRIA HAS BEEN WELL AWARE OF INCRESINGLY TENSE STATE OF ISRAELI NERVES OVER RECENT WEEKS AND MONTHS. HE ATTRIBUTED THIS TO SEVERAL FACTORS: ISRAELI CONCERNS RE POSSIBLE CHANGES IN USG'S ME POLICY HINTED AT IN RECENT STATEMENTS OF US LEADERSHIP; ISRAEL'S DIFFICULT ECONOMIC SITUATION; AND PLO SUCCESSES AT RABAT, UNGA AND UNESCO. IT WAS AGAINST THIS BACKGROUND SARG CONCLUDED THAT TO RELIEVE MOUNTING DOMESTIC PRESSURES AND REVIVE ISRAELI MORALE GOI ON NOV 15 HAD BEEN LOOKING FOR EXCUSE TO LAUNCH WAR.

3. SHIHABI THEN SAID HE WISHED COMMENT ON THE SPECIFIC PIECES OF "EVIDENCE" WHICH VARIOUS IRAELI OBSERVERS CLAIMED WERE INDICATIONS OF SYRIA'S BELLIGERENT INTENTIONS.

A. LATAKIA SHIPPING. THERE WAS NOTHING UNUSUAL IN PATTERN OF SHIPPING IN LATAKIA PORT ON NOV 15 OR EARLIER THAT MONTH. TWO AND NOT RPT NOT TWENTY SOVIET SHIPS UNLOADING MILITARY EQUIPMENT WERE AMONG THE SHIPS IN LATAKIA HARBOR NOV 15. THE EQUIPMENT CONCERNED WAS NOTHING UNUSUAL, PRINCIPALLY TRUCKS AND SPARE PARTS.

B. TROOP MOVEMENTS. THERE WERE NO SYRIAN TROOP MOVEMENTS WHATSOEVER ON THE HEIGHTS PRIOR TO NOV 15 WHICH COULD HAVE GIVEN THE LEAST CAUSE FOR ALARM TO ISRAELI OBSERVERS. I INTERJECTED QUESTION RE TANK MOVEMENTS I HAD PERSONALLY WITNESSED MOVING SOUTH TOWARD THE CAPITOL NOV 16. SHIHABI REPLIED THOSE WERE ENROUTE TO MANUEVERS WHICH WERE ANNOUNCED AND CARRIED OUT FOLLOWING WEEK SOUTH OF DAMASCUS.

C. SYRIAN MOBILIZATIONS. SYRIA DID NOT RAISE THE ALERT STATUS OF ITS FORCES NOV 11 OR 12. IT TOOK PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES, INCLUDING A HEIGHTENED ALERT, ON NOV 15 AFTER MONITORING ISRAELI BROADCASTS AND AFTER ALSO PICKING UP EVIDENCE OF UNUSUAL NUMBER OF IDF FLIGHTS.

4. I SAID I HAD HEARD OF TWO OTHER EVENTS WHICH HAD EXCITED ISRAELI SUSPICIONS. WITHOUT SOURCING THE INFO I MENTIONED VERY LOW ALTITUDE, PRESUMABLY PHOTO RECONNAISSANCE,
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FLIGHT BY SARG MIG NOV 14 AND CLOSING OF SYRIAN MILITARY SCHOOLS AND DISPERSAL OF STUDENTS TO UNITS JUST PRIOR NOV 15 (STATE 252277 - NOTAL). WOULD HE COMMENT ON THESE? SHIHABI REPLIED: A) SYRIAN AIRCRAFT FLIGHTS AT VERY LOW ALTITUDES HAVE BEEN LONGSTANDING, ROUTINE PART OF SARG PATROLS ALONG FRONT LINES ON HEIGHTS. ISRAELIS DO SAME. B) AS FAR AS MILITARY SCHOOLS CLOSING, SEVERAL ARMED FORCES SCHOOLS COMPLETED THEIR TRAINING CYCLES AT ABOUT THE SAME

TIME IN LATE OCTOBER. FOLLOWING THESE NORMALLY SCHEDULED GRADUATIONS, THE STUDENTS PROCEEDED FROM THEIR SCHOOLS TO ASSIGNMENTS TO REGULAR MILITARY UNITS. HE HIMSELF ATTENDED A NUMBER OF THESE GRADUATIONS, AS HAD BEEN PUBLICIZED IN SYRIAN PRESS. (COMMENT: SYRIAN PRESS DID CARRY ARTICLES ANNOUNCING SHIHABI'S PRESENCE ALONG WITH THAT OF MIN OF DEFENSE TLAS, AT LEAST TWO SUCH CEREMONIES IN LATE OCTOBER.)

5. I TOLD SHIHABI I APPRECIATED HIS READINESS TO COMMENT SO FREELY ON THE NOV 15 CRISIS. HIS COMMENTS PROVIDED A USEFUL CLARIFICATION OF HOW SYRIA HAD INTERPRETED EVENTS. I PERSONALLY WORRIED ABOUT THE DANGER OF AN ACCIDENTAL WAR IN THE AREA CAUSED BY ONE PARTY'S MISREADING THE INTENTIONS OF THE OTHER. I THOUGHT WASHINGTON WOULD FIND HIS STATEMENTS HELPFUL AS WE SOUGHT TO HEAD OFF DANGER OF FUTURE SUCH CRISES GETTING OUT OF CONTROL. SHIHABI REPLIED HE WELCOMED SUCH EXCHANGES.

6. IN CONCLUSION SHIHABI STRESSED HIS DOUBTS ABOUT HYPOTHESIS THAT ISRAEL MIGHT HAVE BEEN MISREADING SYRIA'S INTENTIONS IN THE DAYS AND WEEKS PRECEDING NOV 15. FOR HIS PART, HE SAW NO REASON TO DISCARD HIS WORKING HYPOTHESIS THAT EVERYTHING THE ISRAELIS HAD DONE NOV 15 AND SUBSEQUENTLY, WHICH INCREASED TENSION IN THE AREA, HAD BEEN DONE IN ACCORDANCE WITH PRE-ARRANGED ISRAELI PLANS. SHIHABI THEN TOOK, IN PASSING, A SIDESWIPE AT IDF INTELLIGENCE BY SARCASTICALLY NOTING THAT "IN OCTOBER 1973 IT HAD FAILED TO SEE WHAT WAS ACTUALLY HAPPENING WHILE IN NOV 74 IT SAW SOMETHING WHICH WAS NOT HAPPENING."
MURPHY

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NOTE BY OC/T: NOT PASSED USCINCEUR.

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